

AFRICAN-AMERICAN VOCAL MUSIC CURRICULUM RESOURCE GUIDE

for **Sweet Honey In The Rock** and **Return To The Source**

Introduction

All of the world's people have music, and music is a strong part of the life of most people. Most of the world's music, today, is sung. As a natural consequence, music and language form powerful relationships. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the vocal traditions of African-American music. This guide is about the relationship between music and words in the songs of Sweet Honey in the Rock and Return To The Source and the levels at which meaning may reside in their music. The purpose of this guide, is to provide you with information and ideas for preparing your students for the residencies that will take place in your agencies.

The information given is designed to help you, but the extent to which it is successful will depend on the diligence your agency applies before the residency actually takes place. We want to help you. If at any time in the preparation phase, the ideas or concepts presented here are unclear to you, please feel free to contact us for clarification.

The music of Sweet Honey in the Rock and Return To The Source represents a cultural and musical legacy that is both continuous and changing. The reservoir they will draw from is huge. Not surprising, it is not possible to address in great detail all of the roads they will travel. Instead, we are asking you to select and concentrate on activities and musical materials that are germane to the interest and needs of your children. Your task can also be made easier by designing activities that allow students to demonstrate in some overt way, what they have learned.

For example, we suggest that all activities, either as a supplement to the Guide or as follow-up to your residency sessions, be experiential. We think an emphasis on the following will be particularly fruitful:

- design activities that reinforce their understanding of the role music plays in the life of African-Americans.
- Provide opportunities for students to solve musical problems
- Encourage activities that enhance their ability to perform and create collectively as a group.

Sweet Honey In The Rock: Who Is She?

Sweet Honey In The Rock is an internationally renowned a cappella quintet of African-American women who perform a wide range of traditional and contemporary styles including spirituals, blues, jazz, gospel, reggae, doo wop, and rap. Occasionally, they use percussion instruments such as the shekere, tambourine, moraccas, and rain sticks.

Sweet Honey In The Rock is more than a musical group. She is "African American women with the standing power of rocks and of the mountains." She is a culture bearer, who maintains and carries the traditional values, customs, legends, beliefs, imaginative expressions, attitudes, and reflections of the African-American experience. She is a musical palette that evolves organically and continuously out of a cultural legacy born of struggle, with a resolve that is as firm as it is spiritual and noble.



From top clockwise: Aisha Kahlil, Shirley Childress Johnson, Carol Maillard, Nitanju Bolade Casel, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Ysaye Maria Barnwell.

Sweet Honey In The Rock is by definition, a traditional group in that their performances are, musical events rather than just performances. Events that pass on elements of an African world view, as in Ysaye Barnwell's "*Breaths*", and African-American culture that have been handed from one generation to another by oral communication. As a Griot, she does more than perpetuate the oral tradition and history of women in the African-American village and family. She speaks to the universality of all the injustices and the triumphs suffered by sisters, mothers, fathers, and brothers. Theirs is a music that is "people identified." But most of all, **Sweet Honey In The Rock** gives voice to African-American women. And in so doing, advances the common issues and goals that extend beyond the surface conditions of style and frivolity.

As **Sweet Honey In The Rock** explores the peaks and valleys of your imagination, you will experience, in full force, the legacies of African heritage. You will hear, and feel their souls in their singing as the sounds of then and now reverberate within your being. And in the process, I suspect that you, like so many before, will see all things, both seen and unseen, of African-American culture come alive. You will recognize that they all have voices. Voices that speak of history and connectedness. And, with astounding clarity, they will all speak at once.

Return To The Source

Return To The Source is a New Jersey based musical ensemble who performs a wide range of African-American musical styles. In various configurations, they are a **cappella, vocal with instrumental accompaniment, or instrumental.**

The Sankofa is an African bird whose translated name means "go back and retrieve it." **Return To The Source** does just that. They are a mixed, male and female, ensemble whose performances chronicle the historical and creative development of people of African descent. In so doing, they provide an extended account in song and verse of historical events, sometimes including legendary material, of the experiences of Africans in the Diaspora.

Formed in 1985, **Return To The Source** has performed in a broad range of venues including the Montclair Art Museum, Newark Symphony Hall, WBGO and the Black United Fund Community Center Complex. However, their most important venue is New Jersey's schools. They have taken their message to more than 60 New Jersey area schools. It is in an educational setting where the art and technique of using words and sounds are put to most effective use with a grace, and style, that so poignantly captures the imagination.

Return To The Source serves as an important role model. Through their music they recognize and remind us that we must be responsive to the plight of the many who have

fallen victim to circumstances for which they have limited control. Their message extends beyond beautiful sound. It transcends the vagaries of popular taste. For, in the words of one philosopher, "the weakness of a soul is proportionate to the number of truths that are kept from it." **Return To The Source** will bring many truths to you and your students.

The quality and availability of music education has steadily declined in public schools. And as a result, children are being denied an opportunity to explore the one area that all civilizations have been remembered for, their arts. These are difficult times, making the need for groups like **Return To The Source** even more desperate. They carry their mantle with dignity. As you and your students are engaged, **Return To The Source** will open the vaults of your creativity, and help you to recognize that creativity is in part a solution to problems. You will be reminded that the music you are listening to and participating in, is great music because it stands on the shoulders of the many who came before; it is great music because it penetrates your ears with facility and leaves your memory with difficulty. It is great and magical and magical music never leaves the memory.



Kneeling: Joe Scott, Janet Van Kline, Top Standing, L to R: Arnold Parker, Karen Ferdinand, Anthony Jackson, Jackie Jones, Junius W. Williams.

Planning For Teaching Activities

When you begin to plan your activities, you may find the following guide useful in clarifying what you want to accomplish. In all cases, we strongly urge you to use the recorded materials provided by the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, and the Carter G. Woodson Foundation.

There are several approaches you may consider as you prepare for your sessions culminating with the **Sweet Honey In The Rock** concert. One approach is to use the elements of music. The following descriptions define each of the elements and their function.

Pitch is the relative highness or lowness of a musical sound.

Rhythm is the time aspect of music.

Melody is a group of coherent pitches or notes, played, or sung, one after the other.

Harmony is the combination of several pitches played or sung together, often as chords.

Texture is the combination of layers of musical activity in a piece.

Form is the way music structures repetition, variation, and contrast in time.

Style is the way all of the preceding elements of music are combined by performers in a way that is distinct and unique which is then presented to you, the listener, as a recognizable musical selection.

The following chart organizes some of these elements around the selections that are performed either on the recordings you received, or will be performed at the final concert.

The following chart is yet another way to listen to, and analyze the social, and functional aspects of **Sweet Honey In The Rock**, and **Return to the Source**. It may also be useful in establishing a basis for discussing African-American vocal music in its cultural context.

Place of Origin	Time Period	Form/Style	Perf.Style
Africa	Traditional	Ceremonial	Accomp.-Drums
America (south)	Slavery	Play/game, Work Songs, Spirituals	Unaccompanied
America (south)	Reconstruction	Arranged Spiritual	Unaccompanied
North/West	Migration	Quartet, Blues Jazz, Gospel	(Un)accompanied
South	Civil Rights	All of the above	(Un)accompanied
North/West	Nationalism	R&B, Pop	Accompanied
Urban	Post 1970's	Reggae, Rap World Rhythms	Accompanied

FORM/STYLE	SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK	RETURN TO THE SOURCE
Ceremonial chant	"Somagwaza"	
Play/game	"Tama, Tama, Tamali"	
Spiritual	"Wade In The Water"	
	"I Got Shoes"	
	"Stranger"	
	"How Long"	
Gospel	"In The Morning"	"Jesus Is Real"
Jazz	"Peace"	"Mood Indigo"
R&B, Pop	"Young and Positive"	
Rap	"Priority" (video)	"Freedom Rap"

Music is as much about people, what they believe, where they come from, and where they are going as it is about sound. It speaks to such social concepts as culture, society, kinship, and ritual.

Lesson Plan

The following are recommended activities to engage your students in exploring musical styles.

Concept (broad generalized statement of musical ideas)

Musical style is influenced to some extent by various external factors including religious, cultural, social, and economic forces.

Sweet Honey In The Rock

"Tama, Tama" - cultural

"Little David Play on your Harp" - social

Return To The Source

"When It All Comes Down" - cultural

Instructional Objectives (desired outcome of instruction based on one or more concepts)

Through viewing and listening, students will describe and analyze the **musical forces** that influence musical style.

Sweet Honey In The Rock

"African Numbers" (Japanese and English" language counting)

*Students will develop sensitivity to style in music and an ability to recognize the **characteristics** (call-response) that influence style.*

Sweet Honey In The Rock

"Freedom Now"

Return To The Source

"Woke Up this Morning"

Activities (*Illustrative list of actions or functions suggested by the instructional objectives*)

1. Through viewing, listening and study, describe and analyze:
 - A. The influences of musical forces on the music of **Sweet Honey in the Rock** such as:
 1. Culture and Religion
"Somagwaza" - rite of passage
"I Got Shoes" - spiritual
 2. Social and Political
"Young and Positive"- social commentary
"Freedom Train"- social commentary
 3. Economic
"African Numbers," - Swahili, French, Spanish
2. Describe and analyze through viewing, and listening. Illustrate by means of composition and/or performance:
 - A. The various functional applications of a cappella music such as: TV commercials
"Spirit Lullaby"- nurturing
"Down the Road I Be Going" - entertainment
 - B. Composition - **Return To The Source**
"Hey, Hey The Blues" - compose using the AAB format discussed in the seminar).

Sample Strategies (*teacher/leader directed activities*)

1. Locate a variety of a cappella groups who performed between the 1940's and 1960's. List the most prevalent topics referred to in their songs. Use the accumulated list as possible subjects for further activities.
2. Identify and list a cappella groups that are popular today.
3. Listen to "Young and Positive" and "Freedom Now." How are political and social influences reflected in these musical examples? Explore additional musical examples that give positive messages and use forms of the spoken word with little or no instrumental accompaniment.
4. Listen to various examples of African-American vocal groups who performed between the 1920's and 1930's and analyze their specific characteristics in terms of rhythm, melody, harmony, and style. Determine what, if any, influences they may have had on later groups.
5. Make a VHS or 8mm film, five minutes in length of events taking place in and or around your school. Create, perform, and tape a soundtrack in the style of **Sweet Honey In The Rock** and **Return To The Source** for your film.

Post-Performance Discussion Topics

Historical Context

For many, seeing and hearing the music of **Sweet Honey In The Rock** and **Return To The Source** will be like traveling to a new land for the first time. If you are hearing this music for the first time, you cannot draw upon past experiences to come to any conclusions.

In a similar way, we rely on prior knowledge and experiences to provide context and meaning for the music we listen to. The more experienced we are with certain types of music, the faster and easier it is for us to relate to it. By contrast, those with little background may find themselves lost and will often lose interest in listening to unfamiliar music very quickly.

As we try to understand the history, culture and social circumstances around the cultural legacies presented in the songs sung in the workshops and in the performance of the two groups, one word is important, style. Style represents the distinctive features of a work of art. This means that most of the music created within certain times, share common traits.

The a cappella tradition represents a particular kind of singing accompanied by harmonies that are typical for certain periods in African-American musical and cultural history. *Sweet Honey's* book, *We Who Believe In Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock: Still On The Journey* is an excellent source of information on the group, their purpose, and the cultural legacy they represent. So as we examine the music of **Sweet Honey In The Rock** and **Return To The Source**, the following questions may be useful in reinforcing all the workshops and performances.

- What other musical styles played a role in the development of **Sweet Honey In The Rock's** tradition?
- What other historical precedence or circumstance may have played a role in the development of the Blues and Jazz traditions **Return To The Source** talks and sings about?
- How are all of these traditions passed from one generation to another?
- How do they move from one style of music to another and why?

The Role of Music in Our lives

The factor that causes the greatest tension or stress in our everyday lives is change. The events that create the highest levels of emotion are those in which the possibility of change is eminent — birth, conflict, love, fear, disaster or triumph.

- How many of these factors are evident in the songs heard at the performance?
- What role did they play in the relationships between you and the performers on stage?
- How were they communicated?

As human beings, we spend many hours contemplating and evaluating situations that arouse our love, anger, and other emotions. We analyze these emotions as we try to understand them. As we understand them more, we will discover more about ourselves. When **Sweet Honey In The Rock** and **Return To The Source** shared their feelings about what they do as artists, they allow us to better understand some of their life experiences.

- How does their music express human emotions?
- What associations can we make between their musical themes and ideas with our own experiences in life?

New Words

Review with your group the meaning of these new words so that they may get the most out of this residency experience.

- a cappella:** without instrumental accompaniment.
composer: a person who creates a tune.
culture: the arts, skills, customs and beliefs of a given people.
ensemble: a group of singers, musicians, or other kinds of performers.
improvisation: the art of composition in performance.
percussion: a musical instrument that produces a tone when struck.
quintet: a group of five singers
repertoire: the standard collection of songs, plays, or dances a group performs.
shekere: an instrument made from a gourd with beads strung around it.
vocal: having to do with voice or speaking.

Teaching Resources

Visual Aids

1. The Evolution of African-American Music

12"x15 1/2" full color poster that traces African-American music from its origin in 1660s to the present, highlighting relationships between sacred and secular traditions. An excellent tool for teaching and research purposes in the areas of music history and performance, social studies, American and African-American history, American studies, popular culture and multicultural studies.

Music Research International
P.O. Box 6042
Bloomington, Indiana 47407, U.S.A.
(812) 333-0938

2. "Ethnic Notions"

Video documentary that examines stereotypes of African-Americans in popular culture. Each stereotype is situated over a 150 yearlong period and reveals how ethnic notions, both shape and reflect public attitudes about African-Americans and their creative and expressive artifacts.

California Newsreel
149 Ninth Street /420
San Francisco, California 94103
(415) 621-6196

3. "Spike Lee and Co. Do It A Cappella"

An interesting video created for PBS that examines the African-American a cappella tradition. Narrated by Lee and Debbie Allen, it includes performances and interviews with Ladysmith Black Mambazo, The Mint Julips, a female a cappella group from England, The Persuasions, Rockapella, Take Six, and True Image.

40 Acres and A Mule Productions
Brooklyn, New York
Tower Records

4. "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues"

A video that recaptures the lives and times of the "classic" blues singers of the 1920's. It provides cultural continuity for the millions of African-Americans who migrated from the South to the North during World War I.

California Newsreel
149 Ninth Street/420
San Francisco, California 94103
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New Jersey Performing Arts Center

The New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the last of the great performing arts centers to be built in this century, is currently under construction on a 12 acre site in the heart of downtown Newark. NJPAC is the centerpiece of Newark's revitalization and will include a 2,750-seat multipurpose hall, a 500-seat playhouse, restaurants, banquet facilities, a gift shop, Theater Square and the renovation of the Military Park Garage.

World-class performers from every continent will appear on the NJPAC stages, as well as New Jersey's notable artists and companies. The annual season of NJPAC events will feature outstanding classical, jazz and popular musicians, in addition to opera, dance, dramatic presentations and quality artistic work for young audiences and their families. Opening night is scheduled for the 1997 season.

NJPAC Arts Education Department

The New Jersey Performing Arts Center's Arts Education Department will provide the state's youngest citizens with a creative environment that nurtures exploration and discovery in the production and performance of the arts. The Community-Based Music Residency embodies the benchmarks which will be common to all NJPAC arts education programs: exposure to high quality artistic work; hands-on opportunities for children to participate in the artistic process; and, an arts education resource for children locally and statewide.

The NJPAC Community-based Music Residency is designed to expand and enrich the cultural experiences of children and their parents through performances, workshops and educational materials. This year's residency featuring Sweet Honey In The Rock and Return To The Source provides an opportunity for participants to explore and nurture their creativity and to understand how music is shaped by social and cultural influences.

The Carter G. Woodson Foundation

The Carter G. Woodson Foundation's mission is to nurture, preserve, enhance and celebrate the creative expressions, the cultural heritage and the historical achievements of African-Americans through performing arts events, exhibits and educational programs.

The Artists-In-The-Schools program provides arts education related performances, training sessions, workshops, study guides and supportive materials designed to instill knowledge of African-American culture to the children of New Jersey.

The Community-based Music Residency featuring Sweet Honey In the Rock is presented by the New Jersey Performing Arts Center for Trenton, Princeton and Newark area youth and families in cooperation with the Carter G. Woodson Foundation and the McCarter Theater.

Curriculum Resource Guide Produced by: The Carter G. Woodson Foundation

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African-American Vocal Music Curriculum Resource Guide for Sweet Honey In The Rock and Return To The Source

Student Learning Contract

Useful learning strategies can also take place outside of the classroom. One effective way is to use individual learning contracts. The following may be used as a guide for developing contracts geared to student needs and interest.

Topic: What If You Had Been Born Thirty Years Ago

The object of this contract is to find out what it would have been like to live during the time when many of the songs Sweet Honey sings about were popular. During the following one/two/three/four weeks (student circles one) I will do one/two/three/four/five things to find some answers.

1. I will talk to these people:

2. I will read this book:

3. I will watch this television program or videotape:

4. I will visit this place:

5. I will write a letter to _____ and ask these questions:

On _____ I will share what I discover.
month /day/year

I will use the following method(s) to present my findings (check one or more):

- ☐ Write a paper ☐ Speak to the Class ☐ Record an audio tape ☐ Make a videotape
☐ Write a skit based on my findings ☐ Other

Student Signature _____

Teacher Signature _____

Date _____

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